



A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World? 3500 BC-AD 1603

Simon Schama

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Simon Schama's magisterial new book encompasses over 1,500 years of Britain's history, from the first Roman invasions to the early seventeenth century, and the extraordinary reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Schama, the author of the highly acclaimed *Citizens* and *The Embarrassment of Riches*, is one of the most popular and celebrated historians of our day, and in this magnificent work he brings history to dramatic life with a wealth of stories and vivid, colorful detail, reanimating familiar figures and events and drawing them skillfully into a powerful and compelling narrative. Schama's perspective moves from the birth of civilization to the Norman Conquest; through the religious wars and turbulence of the Middle Ages to the sovereignties of Henry II, Richard I and King John; through the outbreak of the Black Death, which destroyed nearly half of Europe's population, through the reign of Edward I and the growth of national identity in Wales and Scotland, to the intricate conflicts of the Tudors and the clash between Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots. Driven by the drama of the stories themselves but exploring at the same time a network of interconnected themes--the formation of a nation state, the cyclical nature of power, the struggles between the oppressors and the oppressed--this is a superbly readable and illuminating account of a great nation, and its extraordinary history.

A History of Britain: At the Edge of the World? 3500 BC-AD 1603 Details

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Andrew Smith says

What really struck me as I started this book was how lucky I am to live in the age I do. It tracks the history of the Britain from its earliest settlers through to the death of Elizabeth I, though it should be noted that this timeline falls short of the actual unification into a sovereign state by about a hundred years. It skips through the first three thousand years in a blink of an eye but then came the Romans, where it lingers to talk at length of their three hundred years of occupation. Actually, this conquest seems to have been a relatively friendly one, which is more than can be said for the arrival of the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxon and the Normans that followed. There was slaughter aplenty and no sign of satellite television, smartphones or easyJet flights to the hotspots of the Mediterranean to ease the strain. Life was tough... and short.

But the meat of this book focuses on the era of the Plantagenet rulers (1145 – 1485) and the Tudor period (1485 – 1603). In this time, you only needed to look a someone a little ‘sideways’ to find out that your next stop was to be kneeling before a block, facing a bloke with a huge axe. There seemed to be an and endless list of executions of notable figures. The Kings and Queens, to a large extent, were a motley bunch and there was always someone looking to undermine them or overthrow them – so I suppose a degree of trigger finger (axe finger?) is excusable.

Such were the excesses of some rulers that eventually the Magna Carta (1215) was signed by King John of England as a practical solution to a political crisis he was facing - and thus launching a document that was to become a cornerstone of the British constitution. There were many more challenges to come, though. In the 1300’s the Black Death arrived in Europe and killed approaching half the population of this island. This must surely have been the most appalling time in history!

A good deal of the high profile history herein wasn’t a surprise to me, though it did flesh out some detail. But there were a number of things I’d just not come across before. For instance, I was totally unaware of the fact that anti-Semitism was rife in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There were massacres in York in 1190 and an Edict of Expulsion was issued by Edward I in 1290, ordering all Jews to leave the country immediately!

It’s not a bundle of laughs, this book, but then again it’s not meant to be. It’s informative, if a little dry in parts. But if, like me, you want to gain some insight into what made pre-Britain great then this one might just do the job.

Chris says

I knew about Simon Schama's A History of Britain from watching the excellent BBC documentary series of the same name that was based on this 3 volume set. If you delve into these books, I would highly recommend watching the 15 episode series first in order to get a primer, especially if your knowledge of British history is weak. It helps immensely to get a visual of things that Schama is referring to before starting on the books.

This first book of the series spans prehistoric Britain to the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603. It's a huge amount to cover and there are an overwhelming number of facts and dates discussed. Sometimes it felt rushed, and other times, he did a more thorough job of covering events. (For instance, he thoroughly

discussed pivotal events such as The Battle of Hastings, the Magna Carta, and the English Reformation under Henry VIII. But the events of the 1400's were not covered very well). I have to admit that parts of it were dry, especially those that he only discussed on a superficial level and those I was completely unfamiliar with.

I do enjoy Schama's writing style and would recommend this book if you are interested in British history. However, for a more entertaining overview, I would watch the mini series first.

Read count: 2

1. January 2014
2. November 2015

Art says

When I found out that Simon Schama's amazing documentary "A History of Britain" is coming out in book form, I jumped at the chance. The documentary was a fantastic work, standing out from the usual History Channel fare by its sheer unapologetic willingness to tell a good story without dumbing it down for the lowest common denominator consumption. For all that, it was still what good history should be: a damn fine story.

The book is not just the film in print form. It expands and rearranges the material somewhat, and makes up for lack of video with some fantastic photographs of artifacts, buildings and books. The adaptation from TV script is evident in the choppiness of the narration, but the connections between events and characters are solid and the effect is not at all jarring. This book won't bore you.

Because above all the book is the same as the film: a damn fine story. Schama doesn't shy away from taking sides and expressing his opinions. It is, after all, **his** history of Britain. He deliberately avoids the article "the" in the title. You can tell he prefers Harold over William the Conqueror in 1066, has no respect for the Vikings (the best he can manage is to call one of their kings a "capable" ruler), and has mixed feelings for Elizabeth I. And hell, that's fine! You will not find a detailed, in-depth discussion of British history, but rather a good, solid primer delivered in an irreverent style that's in itself quintessentially English.

Even if you're the type who yawned and rolled their eyes through high-school history lessons, I bet you'll enjoy this book.

JenniferRuth says

If you are looking for a book that will give you a general history of Britain then this is not the book you are looking for. Schama rigidly sticks to the politics of the English monarchy and covers little else. Scotland and Wales are mentioned only when their histories cross with England. Social history is barely touched upon, technological and scientific history is ignored and Schama has a terrible habit of mythologising his subjects.

On the whole, I came away from this book terribly depressed. It's a chronology of men with too much money and power forever fighting one another for more money and power. Schama tries very hard to make it sound majestic and noble but this often leaves a bad taste in the mouth when he's talking about the slaughter of

thousands of men. I was left wondering about the British citizens. The ones who fought the wars, worked the fields, drank in ale houses and raised the children. What did they think and wear and play? This book isn't interested in telling that story.

If you want to learn about the Kings and Queens of England then this book is a good choice but I can't recommend it for anything more than that. I certainly came away more informed about the monarchy than before I went in.

Ross says

I am giving this 4 stars because I enjoyed the style and quality of the writing so much. It is both informing and entertaining,

which the author says in his introduction should be the goal in writing history.

First, I am not really interested in British history to learn about her long line of monarchs, most of whom were megalomaniacs, and many also monsters and/or fools into the bargain.

My concern with British history is I am trying to understand why the United States came to invent the modern world in 1787 with the

creation and signing of the American Constitution. We certainly got the basic ideas from the British and that in turn must have come

somehow from the history of Britain. This history led to the idea in America that it was the common people that were sovereign, and not

some crazy or horrible monarch, which was how the whole world was organized up to that point in time. The big question is why did the people of Britain gain certain rights over the monarch and nowhere else in the world ?

This book does a good job in describing the numerous historical events that took place in Britain, progressively over time defining the

rights of the people in opposition to absolute rule by the monarchy.

This is Volume I of 3 volumes and goes up to the end of Elizabeth I's reign. So here we see the start of the people's rights with

Alfred and then a big jump ahead under King John with the Magna Charta, and some further advance with Elizabeth and the rights of the Parliament.

Read again June 2017 since I can't find new books to read.

Riku Sayuj says

[Well, it is not as if there are minutely exact parallels, but rough parallels are all over the place. Martin takes events from across English history and sticks them together to serve his plot. A murder-by-pushing from Elizabeth's time might be stringed together with an usurper's story from early 12th Century, and so on. So it is not that you will completely ruin your viewing/reading pleasure (btw, since interesting things to read far outstrips go

Wayne Barrett says

Though I can say I learned a lot from this book, I can only say that what I learned dealt mostly with the politics and monarchy of Britain because that is primarily what this book covered. I think it may have also been a little more appropriate to call this a history of England because Ireland, Scotland, and Wales were given very little attention here.

Informative yet limited in historical subject matter.

Beth (moonivy) says

Read 7/07-2/8/08

A History of Britain is the companion book to the excellent BBC television program. Schama is a gifted writer and his passion for history shines on every page. This is a lively, interesting account of British history, chock full of facts and pictures and an appealing dry wit. I adored the television series (Schama reminds me of an erudite Elvis Costello, which amused me) but the book, of course, is much more detailed and quite fascinating. I particularly liked the reoccurring theme of the conflict between sovereignty and "the community of the realm". Schama does an excellent job of tracing the fluidity of the political power structure over a large chunk of time. Highly recommended

Number : 9

Publication : 2000

Genre : History

Rating : 9.5

Where From : my shelves

Reason : Loved the BBC television program

Maitrey says

A History of Britain (HoB) is exactly what it says on the tin. But whoever said that was a bad thing.

Simon Schama is a British art historian who also specialises in Dutch and French history. So just why is he writing a trilogy of history books on Britain? (There's a debate whether he wrote the books and then the BBC produced a show on them or the other way around). But a few minutes into the book, you know exactly why he was roped in.

HoB is the kind of witty, exciting, yet extremely good history I always love reading. Although the time period tackled in this book is large, the book is so free wheeling and never with a dull moment.

Schama quickly zips through Celtic and Romano-Britain and although he's come under some criticism that he hasn't given these time periods their due, he brushes it under the carpet telling that these periods don't really deal with "Britain" but rather a hotch-potch of various English, Welsh and Scot/Pict states.

Saxon, Viking and Norman invasions all spice things up a bit and Schama spends quite a bit of time discussing what the people of that time may have thought of all the axe-wielding raiders/colonizers on the loose. Overwhelmingly, there is a feeling that Schama has taken on this task to re-look at how the history of Britain has been written until now by British historians with a Marxist bent of mind (who were themselves

critically re-looking at 'Whig' history). The Vikings are a case in point. While early Marxist historians have somewhat brushed it aside telling Viking invasions didn't really change Britain all that much for the common man, Schama points out that no, the Viking invasions had far-reaching effects on people across all social and economic strata.

1066 is another of those that Schama spends considerable time with. It really was an "important date" in the history of Britain. Beckett and Henry II's Common Law are also given their due.

Complicated bits which involve entangled family trees and bitter dynastic feuding, such as the Anarchy and the War of the Roses, are just superficially touched. Although this was initially annoying since I wanted to know about these periods, I realized it's impossible to do justice to them without spending a great deal of time, plus here genuinely a case can be made that the political feuding didn't much affect the common people on the ground.

Predictably, a lot of time is spent on the Magna Carta and what it meant. And while it is well known that a bunch of Barons blackmailed the King into signing it, Schama argues that it had far reaching effects both in 1215 and in later British history. The English-Scot wars of Edward I are also covered in detail.

But there were some major grouses of mine here. Schama completely skips Richard the Lionheart's Crusade and campaigns in Europe and even the Hundred Year's War between the English and the French. Surely the French Wars at least merited some attention as it probably had an impact on both countries nascent nationalism. I can only hope the later volumes look outside of the British Isles, as I can't quite think of later British history without a Calcutta or a Boston.

The rise of the Tudors, the Reformation, the "Henries" and Elizabeth are very well discussed. I felt this was the strongest quarter of the book wonderfully merging cultural and political history. Read the book if you've to for this alone.

Overall a History of Britain is a page-turningly good history, and I think it achieves this by not compromising on any scholarly rigour. Erudite, witty and yet Schama never misses great insights that leave you amazed.

I listened to this as an audio book, and after listening to so many American accents it was a welcome change to listen to a British one. The narrator Steven Thorne does a wonderful job, and it always brought a smile on my face when he switched to Scot, Irish or cockney accents. I can't wait to dive into Volume 2.

Craig says

I was mostly disappointed with this book. I have three main complaints:

1. There is too great a focus on the monarchy. The book is dominated by narrative on the comings and goings of the English kings and queens and other characters at court. I accept this is the best-documented aspect of medieval life, however it seems to me to be a rather old-fashioned way of looking at history. I'd like to have heard much more about societal changes, religion, and so on.
2. Despite being called a History of 'Britain', this is really a History of England. Scotland barely gets a look-in and only then because of its links to the English succession. I can't remember Wales getting much of a

mention at all.

3. I wasn't keen on the style. Yes it's easy reading, but Schama peppers his narrative with what I can only describe as annoying verbal flourishes as he (unsuccessfully in my opinion) attempts to bring his characters to life. He's constantly making statements about how people were thinking or feeling that seem to be based purely on conjecture. I didn't find this helpful.

On the plus side, *A History of Britain* remains an accessible primer on British history (or more accurately, the history of the English monarchy), and I did find it easy-going and learnt some interesting snippets of information. It also comes into its own when it gets to the Tudor period, because of the wealth of fascinating court personalities there is to cover.

However I don't think I'll be progressing to volumes 2 and 3.

Jane says

Where I got the book: audiobook on Audible.

Having listened to the first two books in Bernard Cornwell's Anglo-Saxon series, I was all fired up to revisit some early British history. I'm a bit disappointed, though, that Schama's history is so focussed on the kings-and-queens side of history. I really wanted to hear more about the rest...culture, society, clothing, that kind of thing. But if you're looking for a straightforward and reasonably entertaining overview that stretches from prehistory to the Tudors (there's a second volume for the rest) this isn't too bad a tome. Actor Timothy West narrates, and does it quite well, except he makes a mouth noise at the start of sentences that I can't help hearing.

Kelly says

This is the book that kickstarted my anglophilia when I was about 13 years old. I mean, I was already trending that way in my book choices (My Victorian thing started early), but this sealed the deal. It's a history book, over 400 pages that deals with thousands of years of history. And I just devoured it, in about a week. At the age of 13, where I shouldn't have found the reading remotely interesting. He makes it into high drama that keeps you turning pages. It's presented in a genuinely interesting and readable way. I just found this in the stack of books at my parents' house and started to leaf through it. I was 100 pages in an hour later. I couldn't just skim it.

Obviously, you have to love English history to be interested in this book, as I do. Also, as it is not you know, a few bricks in width, it obviously glosses over the details of a lot of things. He just doesn't have the time to deal with it. He does give you all the events and the salient details that you need to know to keep the history moving, all the major battles and deals and figures and trends. He does a wonderful job of tying all the knots together and showing continuity as well as change.

Love it.

Neil Pearson says

Simon Schama can certainly write history in an enjoyable and accessible way. Clearly there's a lot of time to be covered in the book resulting in some jumps but he shines a light on some periods and monarchs I knew nothing about. I was a bit disappointed that he skimmed over some events, most notably the wars of the roses while spending a lot of time on Elizabeth I. I guess that happens when something with a large scope is being written. I think I found Edward Longshanks and his descendants the most interesting part of the book. I'll be checking out other books by Schama, that's for sure.

The narration in the audiobook is very solid - although he sometimes goes to town on the accents but that's the only issue I found.

Mark Thompson says

This is a fairly decent summary of British history if a bit sketchy. Schama clearly has his favourites-the final chapter, for example, focuses exclusively on Elizabeth I whereas other significant medieval figures such as Henry VI, Edward IV, the princes in the tower barely get a mention. Yet another historian enamoured with the Tudors I fear!

Welsh and Irish readers may well feel a bit sidelined as the book has a heavy emphasis on English history. There's little in the way of insights into life beyond the royal courts, foreign invasions and battles. You might reasonably expect to read about the cultural relevance of people such as Caxton or Chaucer but there is not much outside the establishment of the day.

This is, however, a slightly unfair criticism in view of the breadth of time covered in volume 1. It is an ambitious undertaking and Schama writes extremely well. A sound knowledge of the basics of British history are assumed though the tone is never too simplistic or overly academic. Schama's enthusiasm for making history accessible is evident throughout and you cannot criticise his determination in tackling this subject.

I am certainly looking forward to reading volume 2-the shorter time frame should highlight the strengths of his writing. All in all a good, if slightly erratic, read.

John says

I was disappointed with this book. I acquired it years ago when it was first published and was featured on seemingly every popular history book list at the time. It's been sitting on my shelf ever since and I thought it high time I read it.

I wasn't missing much all these years.

On the plus side, it's an easy read - big print, glossy pages, lots of full-color images. In fact, I'm tempted to classify this as a coffee table book of British history, as opposed to any serious academic venture. It's a broad-strokes history of the English peoples from pre-Roman times through the death of Elizabeth I.

Being a quasi-coffee table book, I'd like to say that it functions well as an introductory history of Britain, but in that regard it's not quite broad-strokes enough. It's obviously written for an English audience (it's a companion work to the television miniseries the author produced for the BBC) and it presumes a basic knowledge of British history already possessed by the reader. The author occasionally mentions people and

events without any explanation of who or what they are - it's apparent that the reader is already supposed to know about these things. For American readers such as myself, who weren't taught British history in primary school, it leaves one at a bit of a loss.

This might also explain my confusion over the grandiose historio-philosophical statement with which he begins the book, in the author's introduction. He makes it clear that his intention was to present a history of Britain which falls neither into the jingoistic tradition of historical British unity, nor into the reaction against that tradition which stresses historical upset and discord.

I have no sense of whether or not the author succeeded in writing a new kind of history of Britain. Being a reader who is not a product of, nor directly familiar with, the aforementioned historical tradition and its attendant anti-establishment elements, I can't say if his desired balance was achieved.

I can say that this was an awfully underwhelming book, for having such an over-inflated goal.

Finally, and despite being a quasi-coffee table book of British history, I was put off by the complete lack of citations and foot/end notes in the text. At the end of the book there's both a bibliography of primary sources, and one of secondary sources listed by chapter - but that doesn't tell me specifically which sources were cited where. That goes against everything I've ever been taught about the requirements of scholarly writing and makes it difficult for me to take this book seriously as a sufficiently academic work.
